

Rayford Harper

## Beyond Simply Black and White

Ray Harper in front  
of the Monroe  
School.

I grew up in the great sunshine state of Florida. Like many other families, we took the typical annual summer family vacation by visiting our relatives.

Those family vacations were very special times because my brothers and I were excited about the opportunity to visit our grandparents; but just as important was the chance to be on a farm. My mother and father grew up about 20 miles apart in two small rural farming towns in the south. We were fortunate to be able to visit both sets of grandparents, uncles and aunts, and cousins frequently during our family vacations. As we got older, our parents allowed my brothers and me to spend most of the summer with our grandparents. My parents may have even felt that the farm was a less likely place for my brothers and me to get into trouble, compared to back at home in the city.

However, it didn't matter to my brothers and me because we were with our loved ones. We were visiting another world living on a farm, and probably more important, we could be children. The weekends were always special. We got to put on our good clothes, visit other relatives who had kids our ages, or our favorite "Uncle Floyd." We fared pretty well too, when it came to being rewarded for discipline, hard work, and obedience by us getting money to buy candy, cookies, ice cream, or soda.

One Saturday morning, my grandparents loaded up the truck and we left for town. When we reached town, my grandfather made his normal rounds before he stopped across the street from a small convenience store. In typical innocent childhood fashion, I raced through the front doors of this store to fulfill my desire to spend. I purchased my cookies and soda, and even had change left. Little did I know how this experience would be a memory that I would never forget.

When I returned to the truck, I was sternly lectured by my grandmother for naive actions. She told me that I could have been thrown out of the store, beaten, killed, or placed the whole family at risk for what I had done. She told me to look up and read the sign located in the corner of the store

window. The sign had an arrow underneath it and the inscription

read **"COLORED ONLY."** The sign meant that colored people had to go around to the back door for service, opposite the entrance I had so innocently taken. This was my first real encounter with segregation up close. No longer would someone have to tell me about how it used to be, or when things were different.

Throughout history, race has been too often used as a means to distance, distort, and divide people. There have been very few times that most people could say that they have truly experienced any meaningful programs or celebrations, where there have been diversity in cultures and people. Even as children, we are taught that we are different from people who do not look like us, dress like us, or act the same as us. The proposition of this article is that *Brown v. Board of Education* National Historic Site can be one of the ways we begin to go **beyond simply black and white.**

I believe that if we were to look closely at our symbolic and patriotic covenant we call the Pledge of Allegiance, we would find the true meaning of the *Brown* decision. The Pledge of Allegiance talks about "one nation (not one for black, and one for white), with liberty and justice for all." On May 17, 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court unanimously declared that separate educational facilities were inherently unequal, and as such, violated the 14th Amendment to the Constitution, which guarantees all citizens equal protection of the laws. Though the decision focused narrowly on education, the principal was broadly applied to every aspect of life for African Americans. In effect, the *Brown* decision simply reversed the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision of May 18, 1896, which sanctioned the separation and treatment of people based on race, thereby creating the doctrine of **"separate but equal."**

When we consider how far we have come as a country and as a people, we see that since the 1954 landmark Supreme Court decision, many of



our public schools in major cities today are still under court-ordered mandate to bus students, build magnet schools, and improve the racial balance of children receiving public education. Therefore, I would like to offer several suggestions about how we begin to go beyond simply black and white.

First, we should not be afraid to preserve and interpret history because it is sensitive, unpleasant, emotional, or controversial. Much of the history relative to the contributions and experiences of African Americans, Native Americans, Hispanics, Women, and others have been left out of general classroom textbooks, thereby providing a perception that either it wasn't important enough, or nothing ever happened. Oral history projects have proven to be excellent means of documenting many of these unknown and unrecorded treasured memories of the past. However, we must put our past before our pride, and be courageous enough and willing to remember the bad times as well as our good times. It is important that we acknowledge and accept that there are differing perspectives, and as additional information and scholarships become available, history and our perspectives will continue to evolve.

Next, we must look **beyond simply black and white** when we commemorate the contributions and experiences of all Americans. For example, we have Women's History Month, Native Americans Heritage Month, Hispanic Heritage Month, and Black History Month that we commemorate. One of the problems with this is that we tend to limit our remembrance and reflection of our people to one program, to one day, or to one week out of the year. An associate of mine said that he spent the first federal holiday honoring the late Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., with an African-American family. I was pleased to hear that he took advantage of this opportunity; however, my concern was that he simply did it because of the holiday. Are the experiences and contributions of women so insignificant, irrelevant or limited, that one month out of each year is enough time to recognize, commemorate, and celebrate? Of course not, but until we stop defining **history** as Black, Native American, Women, Hispanic, and others, we will continue to be divided by our differences.

Finally, we have an opportunity to commemorate our past, present, and progress. On October 26, 1992, the U.S. Congress passed public law 102-525, creating Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site. The site commemorates the landmark Supreme Court decision aimed at ending segregation in public schools, and the integral role of the Brown decision in the Civil Rights Movement. Unlike any other national park, this site will provide an in-depth examination of the

era of segregation in America and the conditions that led to the 1954 Brown decision. The site will interpret the consolidation of five corresponding desegregation cases argued as a part of the lead case (*Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*), and how the Brown decision provided the foundation to the Civil Rights Movement.

The *Brown* decision has been described as the Civil Rights case of the century, and even today still ranks within the top 10 most noted cases among lawyers and law students. We often forget that the same principle of the Brown decision still has direct application in our lives today. For example, issues that deal with the rights and privileges of our senior citizens, and age discrimination, go beyond the issue of race. Challenges that deal with accessibility, and reasonable accommodations and the rights of those of us with disabilities, go beyond the issue of race. Benefits that involve the rights of both men and women who have served this country in wars, and distinguished themselves as veterans, go beyond the issue of race. Laws that deal with equal pay, equal employment opportunities, and sexual harassment against women, go far beyond the issue of race. When you really look **beyond simply black and white**, you find people.

Planning for Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site is currently underway. Funding has yet to be appropriated for the rehabilitation of the site (the former Monroe Elementary School) or the production of permanent exhibits to interpret this period of American history. The *General Management Plan and Historic Resource Study* is scheduled to be completed by the spring of 1996. In addition, the Historic Structures Report is scheduled to be completed in December 1996. Staffing currently consists of a superintendent, chief of interpretation, administrative officer, and a term historian. The site was recently awarded a \$7,500 grant from the National Park Foundation for the development of a curriculum-based educational program and teacher workshops.

Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site is one of the most significant additions to the national park system, and the commitment to preserve and protect our past for the benefit, enjoyment, and inspiration of the American public.

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